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Duxbury Clipper

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Duxbury's Early Settlers — John Washburn

The Seymours and Fields

This is the last part of a 3 part series detailing the land grant and the attached history of John Washburn.

As Edwin Loomis Davenport married into an acting family (the Vinings), so too did his daughter May. William Seymour and May Davenport were married in January of 1882. William's parents



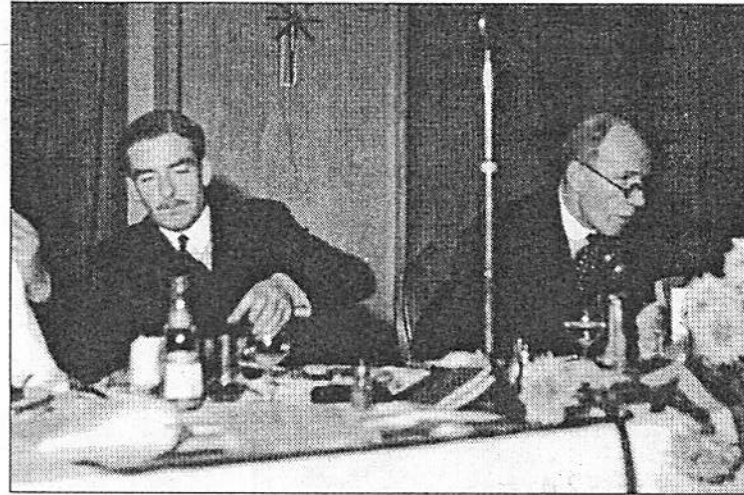
BY LAMONT "MONTY" HEALY

were James and Eliza Seymour, performers of the highest standing, who played at Boston's Howard Athenaeum

in 1852 and 1853. The Athenaeum was later to become known as the "Old Howard" burlesque theater.

An aside here, my maternal grandfather had his plumbing shop next door to the theater, not the best environment for the young Healy boys to be around during their formative years as apprentices.

William's parents played in a stock company in New Orleans where young William first appeared on stage, at the age of three, in his mother's arms. He appeared on stage at the age of five with John Wilkes Booth, the young tragedian who assassinated President Lincoln in 1865. After William's father's death in 1864, Mrs. Seymour and her son took a steamship to New York, where young William became a call boy at Edwin Booth's (John Wilkes' brother) new theater. Here, at the age of 14, he enacted the role of the queen in "Hamlet" for 100 nights, in accordance with the custom of Shakespeare's day of having young boys play female characters. In 1871 he became the call boy at the Globe Theater in Boston. In 1874, before he was 21, he was made stage manager by the tragedian, Lawrence Barrett, with whom he toured as manager and actor. In 1875, William was acting and directing the stage at the Union Square Theater in New York, then the leading stock theater in the United States.



James W.D. Seymour in London, around 1939 or 1940.

After working in San Francisco, William came East again as stage manager for Lawrence Barrett. It was then he became stage manager at the famous Boston Museum (Theater) at a salary of \$50 a week instead of the \$100 a week he had been getting. He took the cut in pay because of the enhanced prestige and the varied experience the museum engagement would give him. He often said his nine years at the museum were the happiest years of his life. It was here in 1882 he met and married the juvenile lady of the company, May Davenport.

Although he worked intermittently as stage manager at other theaters and for a few leading actors, he was primarily stage manager for eight years beginning in 1889 at the Tremont Theater in Boston. He returned to the Boston Museum for one night, June 1, 1903, to deliver the farewell address at the performance of "Mrs. Dane's Defense," after which that playhouse was closed forever.

For many years after that, he passed much of his time at his Duxbury home, Clamavi Towers, which he adored. He never lost interest in theatrical matters and from time to time contributed interesting articles to Boston papers on the early days of the Boston stage.

William died two months shy of his 78th birthday, so he was connected with the theater for 75 years. The Boston Globe obituary stated, "Mr. Seymour was throughout his long career one of the most beloved members of his profession."

May Seymour had a brief career in acting, mostly at the Boston Museum, prior to her marriage. She gave up her career to raise her five children and make a home for William. She could be seen in her Basket Phaeton riding around Duxbury doing her shopping and tending to family matters.

May and William's oldest child was Edward Loomis Davenport Seymour, probably the only Davenport/Seymour not involved in the theater. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture from Cornell University in 1909. A successful horticulturist, who wrote articles and was garden editor of "The American Home Magazine," Edward was founder and president of the Long Island Horticultural Society for 12 years. In 1954 he developed a new variety of giant dahlia, which was named after him, "The Ned Seymour."

May and William's third child was daughter May Seymour, an actress, who married William S. Eckert. She became curator of the theater and music collection for the Museum of the City of New York and was still there at age 78. Their daughter, Anne Eckert, who used the name Anne Seymour, acted in over 120 movies, and radio and TV shows. She probably was most famous for playing Mary Marlin in a popular soap opera for 11 years. Born in 1909

she died unmarried in 1988 after completing a small part in "Field of Dreams." May and William Eckert also had a son, William, who made a career in advertising.

James William Davenport Seymour, fourth child of May and William, graduated from Harvard in 1917. He was in the First World War and wrote about the American Field Service while in France. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government. He worked in publicity and for the alumni of Harvard for a few years and then for Joseph P. Kennedy (Harvard '09) as an aide in Hollywood and later when he became ambassador to Great Britain. James was a screen writer after the First World War with 44 movies and plays to his credit. He was described, later in life,

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slim, erect and "natty" in an impeccable suit. He was the co-writer of "42nd Street." He was married twice, in 1930 to Josephine Paine and in 1935 to Jocelyn Lee, a dancer and actress. Jocelyn was a Hollywood "Spit-fire." She was known as the most beautiful girl in the Ziegfeld Follies. Newspapers called her "The Red-headed Fury." James was her third husband. Her first marriage lasted about a year and a half, and even after the divorce she harassed her ex-husband to the point where he had to leave town. There were stories of her breaking doors, smashing windows, restraining orders, throwing silverware (including knives), court appearances - need I go on!

After her divorce in 1924, she had a daughter in 1926 and a son in 1928 and later married (in 1930) Luther Reed, believed to be the father of those children.

The marriage lasted three months. Again, trouble persisted for some time after the divorce. When James Seymour and Jocelyn were rumored to be getting married

Luther Reed was wishing Jim "all kinds of good luck." James, a true gentleman and diplomat, sat down with Jocelyn and they had a conversation. Jocelyn announced that she was going to retire from the screen and try "being just a housewife." To end the suspense, they were married in 1935. Jocelyn's children used their step-father's Seymour name. Jim died in 1976, Jocelyn in 1980 well known as Jocelyn Seymour.

For those of you who have been following my "obsession" with "Mildred Pierce" and "Ma" Pierce, James may be the Duxbury connection to James M. Cain, author of Mildred Pierce. Both James Seymour and James Cain were in the First World War; writing about their military units, from Paris to northeast France near Verdun. They both scrounged around for paper, ink and type; and both at the same time, near the end of the war. Cain was on the South Shore from mid August to mid November of 1938. His play "7-11" finished in late August and he chose to stay another two and a half months. Cain was a devoted opera fan. Here was a family that had a world-famous opera star in it. The same family had many actors and actresses who were appearing in Hollywood where Cain and his wife were living under the "Hollywood" sign. More significantly, James Cain and James W.D. Seymour were working

as screenwriters for the same studio, Universal, in late 1938 and early 1939, the same time that James Cain started "Mildred Pierce." According to Ray Hoopes' biography of Cain, he always ate lunch with other screenwriters in the studio cafeteria. Circumstantial but compelling!

Back to the Seymours. May and William's youngest son, John Davenport Seymour, was an actor in 19 movies, Broadway plays and other performances. He has appeared with his wife, Abby Lewis, on occasion. Abby was his third wife, and he had a son and a daughter by his second wife Frances E. Simpson.

Richard M. Field and Fanny Lydia Davenport Seymour inherited the Seymour house on Washington Street. They had a daughter, Elizabeth, who married L.L. McGrath and later married a man named Eramo. Richard and Fanny's second daughter, Joan did some acting in Duxbury in the theater on Bay Farm in the 1950s after working in New York. She married Charles William Newbury, Jr. She also worked at the Williams School in Groton, Conn. as a successor to our Bob Hale. Barbara, the third daughter of Richard and Fanny, married Dr. John Hines Kennedy, and she inherited Clamavi Towers. Marian (Maryan), the fourth daughter married Frederick H. Rein, Jr., who was from a St. Louis family that promoted tourism and industry. I understand that Maryan now lives in Wilmington, NC. These daughters had 12 children amongst them at the time of the death of their parents in the 1960s. It is due to the Seymours (particularly May Eckert) and the Fields that Fanny Davenport's and the Seymour's papers are preserved at Princeton University.

I welcome any information about the Seymour and Field families that you may have.

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- Monty Healy